Ji Kang's Theory of Music: Two Interpretations

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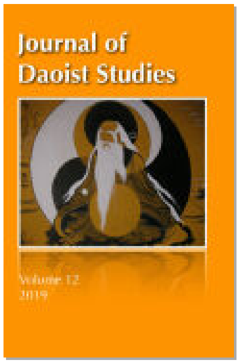

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Ji Kang's Theory of Music

Two Interpretations

TANG MAN-TO

Abstract
There are two interpretations of Ji Kang's 稽康 *Sheng wu aile lun* 聲無哀樂論 (Sound is Without Grief or Joy). The first sees it as a reinterpretation of Confucianism, especially the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) and Xunzi's 荀子 understanding of mind (x*in* 心). The second argues that its aim is to liberate music from Confucian ethical judgment rather than to reinterpret Confucianism in general. In this essay, I critically examine the weakness of both. I argue that the first interpretation fails to understand that Ji Kang's view is a development of Zhuangzi, while the second does not see that it is necessary to reinterpret the *Liji* and Xunzi in order to free music from Confucian judgment.

Both David Chai and Chen Shih-chen have recently offered interpretations of Ji Kang's *Sheng wu aile lun.* Chai claims that it is a gross misinterpretation of seeing it as a new reading of the *Liji* through the lens of naturalism as presented in the *Zhuangzi*. He believes that Ji Kang does not aim at reinterpreting Confucianism from the perspective of Zhuangzi's naturalism. Rather, Ji Kang serves the higher purpose to free music from Confucian ethical judgment. Chen, in contrast, argues that the text is a reinterpretation of Confucianism, especially reflecting the *Liji* and Xunzi's understanding of the mind.

Unlike either of these, I argue that neither of them provides a comprehensive illustration on how ancient Confucianism and Daoism influence Ji Kang's theory of music. Chai does not see that it is necessary to reinterpret the *Liji* and Xunzi in order to free music from Confucian

judgment, while Chen fails to understand that in Ji Kang's view Daoism is a development of Zhuangzi's sense of naturalism.[1]

Chai's Interpretation

Chai argues that "to say that Ji Kang in his *Sheng wu aile lun* re-read the *Liji* through the naturalism discussed in the *Zhuangzi* would be a gross misinterpretation of the text" (2009, 170). He believes that Ji Kang does not aim at reinterpreting Confucianism (especially the *Liji*) from the perspective of Zhuangzi's naturalism. Rather, Ji Kang serves a higher purpose, which is to liberate music from Confucian ethical judgment. Before evaluating his weakness, it is necessary to understand some of his claims.

Chai first notes there is a distinction between ritualistic music and naturalistic music in Daoism (2009, 169). This can be traced to Zhuangzi's refutation of the Confucian discourse on rites and music (*liyue* 禮樂) (Park 2013, 331). The Confucian understanding of music merely focuses on self-cultivation, so that music is regarded as a part of the rites, which emphasis impedes the freedom to enjoy music and distorts its nature. In order to recover the original nature of music, Ji Kang duly follows Zhuangzi in that he extends the discussion on the dynamic relationship between name and reality, moving it from its original onto-epistemological context to that of musical aesthetics.

Chai argues that the discussion of the dynamic relationship between name and reality is a way of naturalizing the burden of music and return to its essential character. In the *Sheng wu aile lun*, the Host points out that "if we are going to draw inferences and distinguish things, we must first seek the truth in terms of natural principle" (*ziran zhi li* 自然之理) (Henricks 1983, 80). Chai believes that this represents a way to approach things objectively, while also understanding the laws of existence and respecting each object's inherent characteristics. What, then, is the natural principle of music?

[1] It is unclear whether there is a developmental relationship between Daoism and Mystery Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學; sometimes called Neo-Daoism) in both Chinese and English study of Daoism. As Chen notes, "It is a complicated and technical problem to judge if Mystery Learning is a strict successor of Pre-Qin Daoism. The same holds true for Neo-Confucianism in the Song" (2012, 82).

Both Zhuangzi and Ji Kang draw two important premises. First, sound is formless without constancy (Chai 2009, 154). Second, emotion is aroused by the presence of mind, in which predisposed emotional inclinations are evoked in the listener (2009, 166). Since sound is formless, it reflects what is presented without retaining anything for itself. It cannot be used to express fixed emotions, and its relationship with emotion is one of "no constancy" (*wuchang* 無常). Here Ji Kang draws distinctions between the terms "sound" (*sheng* 聲), "notes" (*yin* 音), and "music" (*yue* 樂).[2]

Chai claims that in the *Zhuangzi*, sound is taken as the governor of musical notes and music. The character for "sound" points to musical pitches, confirming the idea that sounds are a form of music while in themselves devoid of human emotions (2009, 165). This means that sound is expressed in the aesthetic form of notes and pitches, which in their turn are formalized in music. Music in turn offers a catharsis for emotional release, but is not in itself its bearer. Entirely lacking emotional content of its own, it cannot provide emotional catharsis without harmony among sounds and notes. Ji Kang furthermore differentiates harmony in several ways, distinguishing great from perfect harmony and from that grounded in the mind.

First, sound itself propagates the essence of the natural realm in form of harmony. Listeners superimpose their emotional conditions onto a particular piece of music, which it itself cannot possess or transmit any emotion like grief or joy. In some cases, harmonious sounds have the ability to bring out an emotional response in the listener. Chai claims that "the listener must be receptive not only to his own subjective interpretation (good or bad) but also the degree of modal harmonics" (2009, 169). He appeals to Cook Ding's union of spirit-mind-body in the *Zhuangzi* and argues that through oneness with the harmony of music, the listener can achieve clarity of mind and spirit. This in turn serves as the basis for a release of emotion. As a result, musical sound does not in itself contain emotional expression, but listeners conform to feelings

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[2] Several scholars argue that there are differentiations among sound, notes and music in Ji Kang and Zhuangzi's thought. For Ji Kang's differentiation, please see Wu 2006 and Zhang 1997. For Zhuangzi's differentiation, please see Zhang 1997 and Zhu 1992.

brought about in the process of receiving. Thus, the Host in the text claims that "the stimulation of men's hearts by harmony is, in fact, like the uninhibiting effect that wine has on one's nature or emotions" (Henricks 1983, 81).[3]

Limitations of Chai's Interpretation

Chai strongly refers to the natural principle of music in his discussion of sound, notes, and music. However, he does not clarify the concept of mind in the *Zhuangzi* and Ji Kang's thought. On the one hand, how can a listener conform to the feelings brought about in the process of listening to a particular sound or piece of music? On the other hand, how can an emotional release take place on the basis of the clarity of mind and spirit?

In order to answer the first question, Chai draws on resources from Zhuangzi's naturalism of mind, music, and harmony. He says that "if attaining the proper presence of mind is the only means, by which one can rudely experience emotion, then, in order to undergo an experience of feeling, one merely needs harmony" (2009, 162). This view, in his understanding, is quite similar to the *Zhuangzi*. Harmony in music occurs once the world has entered a state of harmony, when an emotional richness and depth of affairs becomes apparent, fulfilled in an equally harmonious air of expression. What is called calm presence of mind, literally, "balance and harmony" (*pinghe* 平和), then, is to be free from grief or joy, entertaining a state of mind that is nurtured by harmony in music.

He further explains that to be free from both grief and joy is, in fact, a characteristic of Dao, which gives human beings their natural emotions (2009, 155). This is what Ji Kang's means when he says that "sound takes the calm presence of mind as its substance" (*shengyin yi pinghe wei ti* 聲音以平和為體).

In order to explain the notion of Dao, Chai refers to concepts of human, earthly, and heavenly piping in the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. Heavenly piping here serves to demonstrate the inherent nature of sound as being spontaneous and self-determining. In the realm of heav-

[3] There are two versions of this sentence. Dai's version uses "emotion" (*qing* 情) which is used in common collections of Ji Kang's works. But Henricks's version follows the Wuchao 吳鈔 edition, which uses "inner nature" (*xing* 性) instead.

enly piping, someone—possibly the sage—can know perfect harmony since it is the harmony of Dao. This means that Dao, in Chai's interpretation, is a metaphysical rather than a relativistic concept, as it is in the reading of Chad Hansen (2010).[4] If one knows Dao, one can eliminate the subjective discrimination of human and earthly piping, because one realizes that all forms of verbal expression in fact occur naturally. This realization leads to the understanding that musical sounds are nothing but manifestations of heavenly piping. Therefore, Chai concludes that "the essence of music lies in harmony and not in the mind. The music produced by a performer is not representative of the state of mind of the listener, for only harmony can release the emotional condition of the listener" (2009, 164). Thus, emotional release can take place on the basis of clarity of mind and spirit.

Based on the similarity between Zhuangzi and Ji Kang, Chai's interpretation emphasizes that the latter's naturalism of music does not aim at reinterpreting the *Liji*. Instead, it aims at rejecting Confucian ritual music. Zhuangzi's naturalism aims to show that the clarity of mind and spirit is the condition of releasing emotions in the realm of harmony. In perfect harmony, human and earthly piping—that is, ritual music—are both rejected, because natural music is the manifestation of heavenly piping—the harmony of Dao.

Chai's interpretation faces two difficulties. First, some scholars argue that Zhuangzi's naturalizing of ritual music "leads not to a rejection of ritual . . . but to a reconstrual of the foundation and functions, with normative implications" (Fraser 2012, 260). It means that the distinction between ritual and natural music does not lead to a rejection of ritual music, but a reconstruction of its foundation, which is none other than natural music. Based on the nature of music, the normative implication of ritual music is grounded. A reconstruction is never a rejection, as Zhangzi does not aim at abandoning Confucian ritual music. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of natural music, which forms the ground of ritual music.

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[4] According to Ivanhoe (1996), Hansen sees Zhuangzi as presenting a meta-ethical view. The term *dao* refers to a linguistic scheme for making distinctions and guiding action, but not refer to the way the world is a traditional interpretation. Therefore, there are many *daos* but not the one Dao.

Second, and more importantly, if Ji Kang aims at rejecting Confucian ritual music, then it is necessary to argue against the discussion in the *Liji* that offers substantial arguments for Confucian ritual music. To reject one means arguing the other. In this regard, Chai is not aware of the necessary connection between Confucian ritual music and the *Liji*. As a result, he fails to provide a comprehensive illustration on how early Confucianism influences Ji Kang's theory of music.

Chen's Understanding

Chen emphasizes Ji Kang's refutation of the *Liji* and Xunzi's *Yuelun* 樂論 (Theory of Music). Some scholars, including Chen and J. Knoblock, argue for the close relationship between the discourse of music in the *Liji* and the *Yuelun* (Knoblock 1994, 76), arguing that the two sources share the same beliefs, beginning with the notion that the origin of music is the mind, because music is aroused by emotional expression in certain experiences (Chen 2012, 51).

In the *Yuelun,* Xunzi claims that "music is joy. Being an essential part of man's emotional nature, the expression of joy is, by necessity, inescapable" (Knoblock 1994, 80).[5] The *Liji* similarly claims that "all the modulations of the voice arise from the mind, and the various affections of the mind are produced by things (external to it)" (Ruan 1997, 668). It also claims that "all modulations of sound take their rise from the mind of man; and music is the intercommunication of them in their relations and differences" (Ruan 1997, 671). Both Xunzi and the *Liji* argue that sound is aroused by the mind, and that music is the manifestation of the various affections of the mind.

[5] Some scholars argue about the connection between the *Liji* and Xunzi. For example, Hu Shi notes that it is difficult to identify which text copies which texts, including "Lilun," "Yuelun," "Quanxue," etc. They are all collected in the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (Outer Record of Han Poetry) as well as indifferent versions of the *Liji* (Hu 2000, 220). However, some textual scholars find that it is wrong to conclude that Xunzi plagiarizes the *Liji*. Instead, the *Liji* copies Xunzi (Zhang 1994). Although I do not pass judgment on this issue, it is true that the two have extremely similar ideas.

The *Liji* further explains how music is aroused and gains its emotional expression. It says,

> The affections thus produced are manifested in the sounds that are uttered. Changes are produced by the way in which those sounds respond to one another, and those changes constitute what we call the modulations of the voice. The combination of those modulated sounds, so as to give pleasure, and the (direction in harmony with them of the) shields and axes, and of the plumes and ox-tails, constitutes what we call music. (Ruan 1997, 668)

This means that sound is called music, if modulated sounds combine with the manifestation of affection. Emotional expression, in this sense, is one of the key elements of music.

Secondly, human morality and conduct are governed by mind, and music is the manifestation of mind's affection. Morality and conduct can therefore be guided through music (Chen 2012, 52). Xunzi claims,

> It [the sound of the *Odes* and *Hymns*] causes the intricacy or directness of melody, the elaboration or simplification of instrumentation, the purity or richness of sound, and the rhythm and meter of the music to be sufficient to stir and move the good in men's hearts and to keep evil and base *qi* 氣 [sentiments] from finding a foothold there. (Knoblock 1994, 80)

The *Liji* expresses a similar idea when it notes that "the knowledge of music leads to the subtle springs that underlie the rules of ceremony. He who has apprehended both ceremonies and music may be pronounced to be a possessor of virtue. Virtue means realization (in one's self)" (*Liji*, 680).

Both texts argue that "good" music is a manifestation of balance or harmonious emotion. Good music can help cultivate virtue. As a result, they classify the music of Cheng and Wei as licentious music (*yinyue* 淫樂) but praise ancient forms. The music of Kang and Wei is "bad," because its evil and depraved nature affects people and matching evil minds responds to it. On the other hand, ancient music serves to cultivate virtue since it brings the mind into harmony, aiding it to achieve the golden mean.

Shortcomings of Chen's Understanding

Chen argues that Ji Kang's presentation refutes both the *Liji* and Xunzi, but is different in that he does not think the music of Cheng and Wei contains lewdness and perversity (Henricks 1983, 106). Why is this so? It does not have these qualities, because a mind without a particular domination is nothing but clarity and emptiness. This in turn is the condition that makes it possible for people to release emotion when they listen to the music.

Licentiousness and uprightness are both in the mind and not in music; they can be aroused when emotion is released on the basis of clarity of mind. Ji Kang rejects the idea that music does not contain any emotional expression as claimed in the *Liji* and Xunzi. Thus, for him the true nature of the music of Cheng and Wei appears only because of clarity of mind rather than due to a particular musical expression.

More importantly, this music cannot be regarded as good or bad in the realm of harmony, when moral judgment has not not yet been constructed. Chen argues that a harmonious mind is the necessary condition of the release of emotion. He says, "[When it comes to] the essence of music, the mind is given priority" (2012, 70). He agrees that Ji Kang uses Zhuangzi's notions of earthly, human, and heavenly piping to explain the idea of harmony. However, Chen fails to understand that Ji Kang's view is a development of Zhuangzi's naturalism.

If we explicate the different ways of understanding the mind in Xunzi and Zhuangzi, the similarity of Ji Kang and Zhuangzi becomes obvious. Scholars like Lee Yearley believe that Xunzi is closer to Zhuangzi than initially thought (1980, 468-73). This is because, in the chapter *Jiebi* 解蔽 (Dispelling Blindness), Xunzi employs notions of emptiness (*xu* 虛), tranquility (*jing* 靜), and unity (*yi* 一), which he explicitly adopts from the *Zhuangzi*.

However, a closer look at their understanding of mind opens several differences. First, Xunzi's concept of the emptiness of mind refers to the capacity of a mind to acquire new knowledge without interrupting previous understanding. Zhuangzi's notion of the emptiness of mind, on the contrary, refers to a state of mind free from all desires and conventional judgments.

Second, Xunzi's notion of the placidity of mind indicates its capacity to think deliberately, whereas in the *Zhuangzi* it refers to the state of mind the sage attains in harmony with heaven and earth.

Third, Xunzi's idea of the unity of mind refers to the capacity to identify one thing without being confused by various aspects of others. In the *Zhuangzi*, this refers to a state that annihilates the boundary between the cognitive subject and the recognized object. Xunzi's understanding of the mind always emphasizes its capacity of knowing. As David Nivision notes, "This state of mind in Xunzi is a means to clear thinking and correct judgment" (2000, 181). Why is it important?

Lee Janghee explains that deliberation (*lu* 慮) is an activity of the mind when it chooses between polarized pairs of emotions. This process of thinking discerns emotional states and chooses the one proper under the circumstances; it forms a crucial part of critical reasoning. Furthermore, the mind, through deliberation, does not only have the function of selection between emotions but also the ability to differentiate between emotions and desires (2005, 43).

Nivison adds that Xunzi notices Zhuangzi's idea of mental balance, but he does not accept it. For Zhuangzi, a mind that is partial toward anything at all is unbalanced. For Xunzi, balance is necessary for the mind to make appropriate choices (2000, 182). This means that although Xunzi and Zhuangzi use the same terms, their focus is different. Xunzi emphasizes the capacity of mind to deliberate, while Zhuangzi stresses its balance or harmonious state. Xunzi argues that the balance or harmony of mind is a necessary condition of deliberation. More importantly, Zhuangzi's understanding of the mind is naturalistic, because his approach aims at removing all moral prejudices and aims less toward the understanding of mind in culture than at the very nature of mind itself.

In his *Sheng wu aile lun*, Ji Kang adopts Zhuangzi's understanding of the mind while rejecting that of Xunzi and the *Liji*. He refutes the distinction between natural and ritual music as well as the definition of the mind as characterized by emptiness, unity, and placidity.

Ji Kang says that "Confucius's understanding of the subtle and Chi Cha's skilled listening are definitely also false. They are both false records [made up by] vulgar pedants" (Henrick 1983, 80). He argues that fierce (*meng* 猛) and tranquil (*jing* 靜) have the same harmony. "Whatev-

er is moved by harmony is spontaneously released." In the realm of harmony, a release of emotion occurs spontaneously through the emptiness of mind—just as Zhuangzi said in Chapter Two. Ji Kang explains,

> The grieved mind is stored inside. When it encounters harmonious sounds, it released. Harmonious sounds have no sign, but the grieved mind has its essence. If you make the grieved mind that has an essence depend on the harmonious sounds that have no sign, then all you understand is the grief. (Henrick 1983, 75)

Emotion is stored inside the human mind. When listeners encounter harmonious sounds that express neither grief nor joy, they understand and feel grief only because they already have a mind full of grief. In this, Ji Kang's follows Zhuangzi's understanding of the mind, while being drastically different from that in Xunzi and the *Liji*. More importantly, his essay shows his refutation of their understanding of mind and music. Ji Kang adopts the traditional distinction between natural and ritual music, but his project aims at naturalizing ritual music through Zhuangzi's naturalism. He argues that in the realm of harmony the mind releases emotion under the impact of musc. Moral distinctions play no role in this state, which matches natural music at the foundation of ritual music and provides its normative implications. Through Zhuangzi's naturalism, Ji Kang refutes the understandiang of music and mind in Xunzi and the *Liji*. His goal is to reinterpret their position through Zhuangzi's naturalism.

Conclusion

David Chai offers a reinterpretation of Ji Kang's theory of music through Zhuangzi's understanding. He claims that it is erroneous to say Ji Kang's essay is a reinterpretation of the *Liji* or Confucian thought. Yet, his interpretation fails to see the connection between Confucian ritual music and the *Liji*. Thus, he is not correct when he claims that Ji Kang's naturalism of music does not aim at rejecting the *Liji*.

Chen Shih-chen hints at a refutation of Chai's claim when he presents his discussion of the relationship between the *Liji* and Xunzi. He argues that Ji Kang's theory of music argues against Confucian ritual

music and that there is a transferable relationship between emotion and music. However, he does not understand that Ji Kang's view is a development of the *Zhuangzi*, because he does not provide a detailed account of its notion of mind and music in the sense of naturalism.

It is crucial to elucidate the similarities between the *Zhuangzi* and Ji Kang as well as the contrast of his thinking and the position of the *Liji*. It remains unclear whether Ji Kang's theory of music is a critical examination of the *Liji* and a development of the *Zhuangzi*, since simiilarities between them are inconclusive. Still, this paper hopes to open a path toward further clarification by providing some outline of the Daoist naturalism of mind, emotion, and music.

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